



Published on *Go Ask Alice!* (<https://goaskalice.columbia.edu>)

[Home](#) > Honey or sugar: Which is healthier?

Honey or sugar: Which is healthier? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have heard that some sugars, such as those in honey, are more healthful than others. What sugars are in honey? What are the other kinds of sugar? Can any "unmediated" pure sugar be healthful?

Thanks!

Sweet tooth

Answer

Dear Sweet tooth,

This may come as a surprise, but honey actually contains the same basic units as table sugar. Both types of sweet stuff contain sucrose, fructose, and glucose, but honey contains a higher proportion of fructose compared to glucose. There's also a difference in nutrient content — honey has trace amounts of enzymes, amino acids, B vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. However, they're in such low amounts that they're unlikely to provide any health benefits when compared to table sugar. You also asked about other types of sugar; there are many substances ^[2] that may stimulate your sweet tooth, though they may not be called sugar by name if you're perusing an ingredient list. And, there are artificial sweeteners to provide a sugar-like sweetness without the calories or nutrients. With all that being said, it's difficult to say which sugar or sugar substitute is the healthiest, but any in small amounts are unlikely to pose much risk to your health.

Getting down to nutritional brass tacks, the caloric content of honey is slightly higher than that of table sugar. What's more, when consumed in equal amounts, honey can lead to a higher intake of calories and carbohydrates: A tablespoon of granulated sugar has 49 calories and 13 grams of carbohydrates, while a tablespoon of honey has 68 calories and 17 grams (g) of carbohydrates. No matter the differences though, it's key to point out that the body processes all kinds of sugar in largely the same way.

As far as "unmediated pure sugar," also called unrefined sugar, goes, most researchers believe that it offers some benefits over processed forms. While pure sucrose, or table sugar, is highly

processed, pure honey, an unrefined sugar, has only one processing step: it's heated to prevent crystallization and yeast fermentation during storage. The refining process, which is used to produce good ol' table sugar, removes all naturally occurring trace minerals from the sugar plant, leaving behind "empty calories." Refined, concentrated sugar, when eaten quickly and in large amounts, can increase blood glucose and insulin levels, increases triglycerides, and inflammation. In turn and over time, this may increase a person's risk for [diabetes](#) [3], cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses. Unrefined sugar, however, has more fiber, despite the nearly identical caloric content. While unrefined sugar may present some health benefits, the bottom line remains that the body still breaks it down into glucose and fructose.

Other options are available to consumers include artificial sweeteners (also referred to as sugar substitutes). The U.S. Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has approved a number of artificial sweeteners and one natural low-calorie sweetener. Some notable sweeteners are:

- [Saccharin](#) [4]
- [Aspartame](#) [5]
- [Sucralose](#) [6]
- [Stevia](#) [7]

It's good to note though that more research is needed on these sugar substitutes, as their benefits aren't as clear as once thought. Because artificial sweeteners are often several times sweeter than sugar or honey, they may overstimulate a person's sugar receptors. This could lead to a limited tolerance or dislike for other less sweet foods, such as fruit. In other words, artificial sweeteners may cause a person to develop an even sweeter tooth. As artificial sweeteners continue to be used as low or no calorie options, it's possible that individuals will associate sweet foods with lower calories, thus giving in to their cravings for sugary foods.

Ultimately, the differences in health benefits or risks between using honey and table sugar are largely negligible. It's recommended that when consuming honey, sugar, or sugar substitutes, it be done in small amounts. If you're looking for a healthier sweet treat, consider choosing fruits, which contain sugar in their natural form (particularly whole, fresh ones, but dried or canned — without extra sugar added — may be options as well). Not only are they nutrient-dense and [low in glycemic load](#) [8], their higher fiber content helps slow the rise in blood sugar after consumption. Lastly, reaching out to your health care provider or a registered dietitian can help you determine how to best manage added sugar and sweets in your diet on an individual basis and with your health history in mind.

Hope this helps satisfy your craving for information and your sweet tooth!

Alice!

Category:

[Nutrition & Physical Activity](#) [9]

[Optimal Nutrition](#) [10]

[Food for Thought](#) [11]

Related questions

[Which are better: Desserts high in fat or in sugar?](#) [12]

Serious sweet tooth [13]

Diet soda and insulin spikes [14]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [15]

Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [16]

Medical Services (CUIMC) [17]

Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC) [18]

Published date:

May 18, 1995

Last reviewed on:

May 12, 2017

Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
 - Content Use
 - Media Inquiries
 - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
 - Licensing Q&As
 - Get Alice! on Your Website
 - Full Site Syndication
 - Link to Go Ask Alice!

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/honey-or-sugar-which-healthier>

Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/honey-or-sugar-which-healthier>

[2] <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sugars-natural-versus-added>

[3] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/diabetes-mellitus>

[4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sweet-spotlight-saccharin>

[5] <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/risks-aspartame>

[6] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/artificial-sweeteners/art-20046936>

[7] <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sweetener-called-stevia>

[8] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/glycemic-index-and-glycemic-load-for-100-foods>

[9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nutrition-physical-activity>

[10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/optimal-nutrition>

- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/food-thought>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/which-are-better-desserts-high-fat-or-sugar>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/serious-sweet-tooth>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/diet-soda-and-insulin-spikes-0>
- [15] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [16] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/columbia-health-nutrition-services-morningside>
- [17] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>
- [18] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/student-health-service-nutrition-services-cuimc>